

**Loving Education for What it Might Become:  
A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Teachers Working in Anti-Oppressive  
Education**

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By  
Shannon Fitzsimmons

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University of Saskatchewan  
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OR

Dean College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9  
Canada

## ABSTRACT

It has been my lived experience as a teacher that anti-oppressive education makes significant positive impact in the lives of students. It is also my experience that there can be barriers to having a socially just educational practice. This research began as I wondered about the ways other educators were teaching social justice education, and what their experiences were. This narrative inquiry explores the lived experiences and stories of two teachers who work or have worked in schools promoting social justice education. In narrative inquiry participants story their lived experiences. The two participants for this study are Jenna and Rae. Jenna and Rae are both high school teachers that have educational backgrounds in anti-racist education. They demonstrate a commitment to anti-oppressive education through disrupting dominant discourses and normalizing counter hegemonic discourses as ways to achieve socially just practices. Their experiences offer perspectives and stories about how to build upon or find promising practices in anti-oppressive education. The research wonders of this thesis asked the following questions: how have they come to know anti-oppressive pedagogy? What has supported them in doing so? The research is derived from individual semi-structured interviews, and a narrative account of each teacher is presented and inquired into within the three dimensions of inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The two teachers' stories to live by offer valuable insights and reflections moving forward in social justice education. This study revealed the meaningful impact anti-oppressive education has had on the lives of the participant's students, and ways they have practiced anti-oppressive education; as well, offers a critique of current barriers, and ways to move forward with promising practices. This study has taught me

about current teaching strategies to engage students in critical and engaged thinking on social issues. I have also learned about experiences disrupting dominance, and ways that can be done effectively and compassionately. Participants shared the necessity of having staff and administrative support in their anti-oppressive teaching. Additionally, they explained that ways to help achieve support from staff and administration are through creating networks and teacher education. Furthermore, both participants explained the significance of having teacher education. It was suggested that this can be achieved through school systems offering ongoing professional development in anti-racist and anti-oppressive education. Ultimately, through sharing our stories together, we were able to build trust and vulnerability, experience kinship, and learn from each other about ways we can continue to challenge race class and gender in our teaching roles.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### NARRATIVE BEGINNINGS AND CONTEXT

#### Introduction

In the tradition of narrative inquiry, this thesis opens with a narrative beginning of my coming to know anti-oppressive education. It examines concepts and ideas relevant to this research and looks at the theoretical justification of this work. This chapter also explores the educational meaning of social justice, how superiority and dominance is represented in schools, my own positionality within dominant systems, and a review of literature pertaining to social justice education.

#### **Narrative Beginnings**

As a young girl I remember feeling that it was unfair that I was not allowed to play team sports of hockey, like my brother. I had wanted to play so I could be included in the interests of my brother and dad, and I thought it looked like fun. However, when I asked, my dad told me that hockey is something that boys did and that dance was something that girls did. When I asked why this was the case, he said that sometimes in hockey you get bruised and scarred, and girls should have pretty faces without any kind of scarring. I remember feeling upset that there were different expectations for the two of us, based on what was expected and valued of our bodies. When we became teenagers, this notion of unequal expectations extended in topics like curfews and part-time jobs. My brother would have fewer restrictions on where he could go and how late

he could stay out, because it was deemed by my parents as not dangerous for him. I resented that there were things he could do and places he could go that I was limited from. It felt unfair that places and times were deemed unsafe for me because of my gender. Limitations for women's safety was both a societal and family norm.

Later, when I was in grade five I recall being turned down for yet another acting role in one of our various classroom plays. I loved theatre and had some strong skills developing, but I never got to play lead characters because the stories told were always about boys. I remembering feeling frustrated by this and thinking it was unfair. This experience continued on throughout high school. I would get infuriated that my male peers could be significantly less skilled, yet always received feature parts. This was true not only for myself but other female student actors as well. I distinctly remember seeing a casting list that was majority male characters, and feeling devastated about how hard I would have to work to get a role, when my male peers would receive a part purely because of their gender. After high school I continued my theatre education, and found that this issue extended to mainstream performing arts industries.

In my early twenties I moved to Toronto to attend a performing arts college. At this point in my life, I knew that social inequalities existed, but I had never experienced any first hand, other than my own experiences with gender oppression. One night I had been out with one of my male friends who identifies as being gay. We were sitting in a fast food restaurant and without provocation a group of men around our same age began to threaten us. They started saying homophobic slurs and then began to threaten violence. This was scary for me and was my first reality check into the experiences that my friend has to endure. Sadly, while I was horrified and shocked, for him the experience was not new. I had always thought of Toronto as being a more progressive city and when I heard similar homophobic narratives as back home, I realized that



homophobia was not just geographically based. I remember feeling guilty that he was persecuted for simply being who he was, while I did not have to endure the same harassment and violence that was a part of his experience.

### **Inquiry Into My Beginnings**

My experiences in the studies of sociology, women and genders studies, and education have greatly impacted my knowing of social inequalities and inequities. Studying in these areas has helped me to gain a framework and critical analysis for understanding how oppressions involving race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability are upheld and perpetuated by societal systems and institutions. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) wrote,

Institutions produce, circulate, and maintain the dominate culture's norms, values, definitions, language, policies, and ideologies – and do so in ways that are above as well as below the surface of the cultural “water.” Institutions are directly connected to (and reflective of) larger dynamics (interests, power relations, fears) of a given society (p.80).

As an educator, the way that educational institutions uphold narratives that privilege dominant groups and marginalize and oppress groups is of particular interest to me. It is of interest to me because I now understand that through my neutrality, silence or lack of disruption, I am also contributing to upholding the dominant narratives (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004). The lack of disruption has a daily effect on the emotional and physical safety of students in our schools, and it is the role of educators to create safe learning places for all students to flourish (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2014). While there is compelling evidence that safe learning places need to be created, teachers face many obstacles by way of policies and practices of hegemonic dominance in their trying to disrupt the status quo (Orlowski, 2011; Schick, 2014). This leads me to inquire into the experiences of

educators who have lived lives trying to make change and in so doing have disrupted dominant discourses in order to achieve a more equitable and safe learning environment for all students.

From my studies I am now able to understand why, as a child and youth, I was frustrated with gendered-enacting roles. In my growing up, the stories told in theatre and across other acting genres were predominantly about white heterosexual men. These characters were portrayed as strong, courageous, complex, and self-assured, all qualities that have always been important to me, and what I strived to become. The roles for girls and women have been typically docile, meek, simple, and dependent on male characters. Still to this day it is rare to see the protagonist as a fierce and intriguing female character. I know now this is because there are primarily male voices that are heard in our society, that is to say, male perceptions, ideas, and opinions are valued most. The dominance of the white heterosexual male experience being valued most is noted as such across all societal systems, including the education system (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). This difference in dominance and society value has negative impacts ranging from systemic injustices to violence and abuse. This results in marginalized groups being over represented in areas of incarceration and violence, and under represented in school graduation rates. For example, Statistics Canada (2019) states that 9, 902 people with Aboriginal identity were taken into correctional custody over 2017/2018, while only 3,052 of non-Aboriginal people were taken into correctional custody. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2018) states that as of June 2017, 85.4% of non-Indigenous students graduated on-time, compared to 43.2% of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students. Through the evidence shown in these government reports, I comprehend now my feeling that experiences were unfair as a child were because things were unfair, and they still are for groups marginalized by dominant narratives and privileges, that are the result of colonialism, and patriarchal systems.

The dominant stories I described are a micro example of greater societal narratives of who is valued and who is not. Women are still fighting for equal pay, senior positions in companies and universities, rights to their bodies, safe spaces and safety from harassment and abuse, and value of personal knowledge (Schick, 1994). These are issues I face as a white woman, while Indigenous women and women of colour face these and other societal oppressions. For example, a disproportionately high number of Indigenous women have been murdered or have gone missing. In 2011, Indigenous women made up approximately 11.3% of the total number of missing women while they represented only 4% of all women in Canada. Between 1980 and 2012, Indigenous women were over-represented in the number of female homicides, with 16% of all female homicides being Indigenous identity. Additionally, Indigenous females have a recorded sexual assault rate of 115 incidents per 1,000 population, higher than the rate of 35 per 1,000 for non-Indigenous women (Statistics Canada, 2016). The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) entitled *Reclaiming Power and Place*, states that that deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada's alarmingly high rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual) people. Additionally, it states that all of the missing and murdered are connected by economic, social and political marginalization, racism, and misogyny as a result of colonial and patriarchal systems and policies in Canadian society. The National Inquiry's Final Report includes the truths of more than 2,380 family members, survivors of violence, experts and Knowledge Keepers shared over two years of evidence gathering. The report delivers 231 individual Calls for Justice directed at governments, institutions, social service providers, industries and all Canadians.

Through experiencing my own injustices, I wish to develop a way to understand not only my experiences with gendered oppression, but also to inquire into the injustices faced by others and how they dealt with them, including what can be learned from those experiences as I continue my work in education. Through the literature I have reviewed, I have developed an understanding of the various ways students experience injustices and oppressions in the education system.

### **Literature Review**

The aim of this research is to inquire into the lived experiences of two self-identifying anti-oppressive educators to address two research wonders: how have they come to know anti-oppressive pedagogy and what has supported them in doing so. As a white, middle-class, fully-abled, heterosexual woman in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I entered the teaching profession with these locations that were uninterrupted until I began to see and uncover the other privileges that people from marginalized social locations do not have. This is true for racialized and minoritized teachers as well as students in our current school system. The dominant discourses in school systems about students' behavior, attendance, expectations, families, achievements, and successes are ones that privilege hegemonic norms. By this, I mean that school systems privilege whiteness, patriarchy, Christianity, and hetero-normativity and regularly diminish other students whose cultural or economic background, sexuality, identities, racialized markers, and abilities do not fit the norms created by patriarchy, Christianity, Eurocentrism, and class hegemony. Any student that does not fit into hegemonic norms is then marginalized by the school system in ways that disadvantage them, mark them as difficult or slow learners, and ultimately create situations

marked as failures that will follow them for life. Over the past 50 years educational research and literature in social justice has been rich, varied, and abundant, and they examine, explore, critique, and offer partial remedies to the multiple situations of cross-sectional groups in schools and beyond (Freire, 1921 & 2009; Ayers, et. al., 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Nieto, 2000; Greene, 2000; Kumashiro, 2004; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Linton, 2006; St. Denis, 2007; Sleeter, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Orlowski, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Battiste, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Schick, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2017). The underlying assumption is that school systems need to have socially-just trained practitioners and relevant and appropriate curricula so that all students can have a physically, mentally, and emotionally safe learning environment. However, often school practices and policies devalue the identities of some students while overvaluing the identities of others (Nieto, 2000). Educators must have a deliberate political consciousness and commitment to ideologies for diminishing these inequalities (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Orlowski, 2001).

The education systems I experienced as a youth and adult student did little to disrupt notions of patriarchy and hegemony. In my high school experience this could be seen in the prevalent hiring of white teachers, normed division of extra-curricular activities into gendered placements, to the Eurocentric curriculum and texts. For example, the high school I attended was largely white and Eurocentric, and there was little that supported any group other than white Christian middle-class families.

My brother and I attended the same high school and in a recent conversation, he commented to me that we only had one gay student in the whole high school. Obviously, this was not the case. I now know that his perception comes from the lack of visibility of students and is due to students not feeling comfortable sharing diverse sexualities publicly. I have often

felt guilt that my heterosexual privilege has silenced marginalized sexualities and gender identities, and it is my hope that as an educator I can learn more about creating spaces where all students feel safe. Additionally, the only concept I had of inequalities was from the perspective of gender because that was what affected me. For example, male students frequently have more speaking time during class. Hetero-normativity and white supremacy were so normalized that discriminative discourses surrounding race and sexuality were left completely without critique.

After leaving the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, I felt at first confident that I was equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to support all students in a meaningful socially-just teaching practice, given my learning through courses such as *Decolonizing Education*, *Anti-racist Education*, and *Queering Schools and Communities*. However, after entering into my first year of teaching, I quickly became aware that several systems are in place that act as barriers to creating socially-just learning environments for students, such as the barriers I experienced in the prescribed curriculum, normalized community activities, and interactions with colleagues. For example, as a history teacher, I witness and have to teach the curriculum that is almost entirely a European-centered history. I would have to be careful when embarking in anti-racist teaching because the curriculum did not explicitly support the work I was doing in accounting for additional narratives than just those that are European-centered. Educators must apply the principles of the Adaptive Dimension to their pedagogy to ensure the learning needs of all students are met. The Adaptive Dimension is:

... the concept of adjusting any or all of the following variables: learning environment, instruction, assessment and resources. Adjustments to these variables are intended to make learning meaningful and appropriate and to support student achievement... In the Saskatchewan context, differentiation is addressed through the Adaptive Dimension which enables all teachers to respond to student diversity, including their strengths and needs, interests, backgrounds, life experiences and motivations (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2017).

The adaptations made by educators are to support student achievement in all subject areas and courses.

Classroom teachings must be explicitly linked to curriculum guides in order to combat or be ready for criticism from parents, community, or colleagues. I found it very difficult to teach in a way that I felt was socially just for the multidimensional students I had come to meet in a system that I felt was oppressive to them. My awareness of the need for socially-just teachings have come from my own lived experiences, post secondary education, experience with friends of oppressed communities, and listening to stories of students who have been discriminated against in school systems. It is of extreme importance to create safe learning spaces so that all students experience a supportive and inclusive learning environment (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2017). By way of this, it is my aim to uncover how people successfully navigate barriers of difference, white supremacy, and the status quo, and how educators can change discourses, actions, and outcomes in school systems. In the next section of the literature review, I will explore what is understood in the literature as social justice, the ways that school systems enforce discourses of dominance and superiority, and my social positioning in relation to dominant systems and conclude the gaps needed in the literature leading to my research question and methodology.

### **What is Meant by Social Justice?**

Social justice can be understood as a democratic society with equal participation, which allows for equal distribution of resources and opportunities (Bell, 1997), recognition of differences, the representation of interests in decision-making, and development of capabilities to live fulfilling lives (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). It is an important foundation of this inquiry to examine critically and unpack, how and what discourses are used to continue to enforce

inequality (St. Denis, 2007). Social-justice work must look to reveal how the status quo is enforced, and how to unpack the injustices that exist so that new frameworks can be constructed that include equally the lives of all people and equitably where needed. Social-justice education should enable people to develop a critical analysis so they can understand themselves in and through their histories, and their relationship to the outputs of their education, including the objects of their marginalization or oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems (Bell & Desai, 2011). Education should also develop a sense of personal and collective agency to understand, interrupt, and change oppressive behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities and societies of which they are a part. Additionally, social justice practices should also develop the capacity to challenge the institutions that oppress, and imagine the possibility for a better world (Bell & Desai, 2011). Battiste (2013) points out “It is not enough to rebel against injustices, unless we also rebel against our lack of imagination and caring (p. 294).” This means that it is an educator’s duty and obligation to create socially just environments so all students have an opportunity to thrive in education systems. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘anti-oppressive education’ will be used to communicate a teaching practice that focuses on social justice, and the term ‘anti-racist education’ will be used to communicate a teaching practice that is social justice oriented, but focuses on an analysis of racism in educational systems.

Student populations are and have always been diverse in terms of gender expression, sexual diversity, race, cultural languages and origins, class, and abilities. Yet, remnants of colonial history and teaching reside largely in teachers repeating learned socialized hegemonic practices that are patriarchal, Eurocentric, class or status-based, and hetero-normative, which represent the interests of privileged groups (Battiste, 2013; Orlowski, 2011). These socially



constructed norms and teaching to them, both in content and in classroom practices, alienate students in their studies and are detrimental because they erode other ways of knowing (Little Bear, 2000; Cajete, 2005; St. Denis, 2008; Battiste, 2013). These practices of cultural disengagement in schools lead to young people being unemployed, underemployed, unemployable, and vulnerable to the criminal justice system (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is necessary that educators ensure that all students have the opportunity to feel safe, belong, and can flourish in the education system, and in order to disrupt these cycles, educational practices must address the complexities of social inequalities (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Given that teachers are agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated (Dewey, 1938), it is essential that their pedagogy be culturally respectful and responsive, as well as inclusive to relevant and inclusive ways of knowing, including – those who identify as Indigenous. Through socially-just educational environments, students develop an understanding of what it means to be engaged citizens, and to pursue socially-just practices in their daily lives (Ministry of Education, 2009). It is my own experience as a secondary school teacher that I am able to accept education as a legitimate process for growth and change, and value it for the positive transformation it can achieve. By focusing on student learning, rather than behaviour management, cultural competence rather than cultural eradication, and socio-political consciousness rather than strictly school-based tasks, students will be able to take responsibility and interest in their learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

### **How do Schools Enforce Superiority and Dominance?**

For generations in Canada, governmental policies have had the goal of destroying communities and identities (RCAP, 1996; TRC, 2015; Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Early

government officials, and as stated by the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott, sought to ‘kill the Indian in the child.’ This was fostered by schools created by the Department of Indian Affairs to enact treaty responsibilities using only Eurocentric education (RCAP, 1996). Day schools and later Indian Residential Schools (IRS) enforced colonial Eurocentric superiority and dominance through English and French curricula, Christianization, and a domestic colonial work ethic (TRC, 2015). School curricula in residential schools enforced notions of white supremacy by almost entirely focusing on Eurocentric languages and knowledge systems, and giving little to no validation to Indigenous knowledge systems (Peters, 2016). Indigenous knowledge has been systematically excluded from history, contemporary educational institutions, and Eurocentric knowledge systems (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Battiste, 2013). Eurocentric knowledge has considered only its own disciplinary roots, methods, and perspectives as normed for education (Cajete, 1995; Battiste & Henderson, 2009). When there is only a single colonial narrative told in school systems, that single story is what is thought of as right and best, marginalizing all that do not meet that norm of dominance. Additionally, dominance is also asserted through ideologies, beliefs, and discourses about parents, caregivers, community, and staff (Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Orlowski, 2011) and through personal and cultural knowledge construction, popular knowledge, school knowledge, and mainstream academic knowledge (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Normativity in line with white dominance is expected and challenged when other groups histories or experiences are brought into the curriculum. It is my own experience as an itinerant teacher in Saskatoon schools that many parents in predominantly white communities believe that there is too much Indigenous content being taught in some classrooms. While a government mandate exists for this work to be done (Saskatchewan Ministry Treaty Outcomes, 2013), there

is a disconnect between government and society to which society has not yet caught up (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2017). Yet, beyond broad goals for diversity and inclusion from Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (SME, 2009), what can move educators to a more transformative academic knowledge that “challenge[s] academic knowledge and that expand[s] the canon” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 10). When the curriculum does not explicitly support social justice involving diverse groups, how do educators make choices to explicitly include them (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and The Government of Saskatchewan, 2011; SME, 2017)? Additionally, how can teachers feel supported to make explicit their social-justice values, beliefs, and teachings when schools support socialized behaviors supporting exclusion and hegemonic discourses, values, and beliefs that exclude and marginalize groups? Orlowski (2011), described hegemony as the interests of the privileged groups represented as universal interests, to be accepted by the masses as the natural political, and social order. Hegemonic dominance is explicit in schools and activates agents that enforce the status quo (Orlowski, 2011; Schick, 2014). On the other hand, teachers may believe in creating social-justice classrooms, but feel that they do not have the requisite knowledge or appropriate resources to do so. In order for teachers to enact anti-racist anti-oppressive pedagogies, they need to understand how histories of colonization affect current attitudes and outputs, contexts and institutions. They also need to understand their own biases and prejudices based within their own locations and complicities that maintain inequality (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). On-going and persistent awareness of colonization is central to the deconstruction of knowledge around racism and race, as well as teach in ways that make Indigenous realities foundational (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Overall, there needs to be more supports put into place for teachers that are trying to create a more socially just class climate.

## **What is My Social Positioning in Relation to Dominant Systems?**

As a teacher aiming for a socially-just practice, I acknowledge the need for me to continue to deconstruct the location and privileges I am coming from when entering into social justice frameworks. As noted, I am from English heritage, heterosexual, fully-abled, middle-class, and cis-gendered. While I have experienced some marginalization due to my gender, I otherwise experience many systemic privileges. It is important for me to realize that the experiences I have had within systems due to these privileges are not the same as past, current, or future students of mine that come from different locations (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). Indeed, since everyone in any class is coming from differing locations, I need to create a learning atmosphere so that all students are acknowledged, included and feel safe to talk through their own histories and contexts and bring them into the curricula. Ultimately, in order for students to succeed academically they must feel that their knowledges and experiences are relevant and valued and can contribute to their successes, now and in the future. Students need to feel cared about and cared for and experience relevant, engaging, and empowering learning opportunities that provide supportive relationships and community (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Greene, 2000; Sleeter, 2008). Education that considers students as empty vessels for teachers to deposit information into does not connect with students' lives, lived experiences, or ways of knowing. This form of education does not allow for students to think critically about the world around them (Freire, 1921). Social-justice pedagogy not only creates a culture of value, respect, and safety, but it also gives students context for understanding their own experiences, and greater society (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). It is the duty of educators to create learning environments where these understandings can be developed and flourish. As an educator, I feel compelled to

create this environment for students, regardless of current obstacles. Throughout my undergraduate education I was able to connect social justice teaching to my own experiences. However, when I became a teacher in the school system I began to witness the homophobia, sexism, and racism that students encounter regularly. I found it heartbreaking to watch students experience discrimination from school policy, practices, and curriculum based on their identities. At this time in my teaching and learning I became committed to social-justice education. As Battiste (2013) stated:

To understand education, one must love it or care deeply about learning, and accept it as a legitimate process for growth and change. To accept education as it is, however, is to betray it. To accept education without betraying it, you must love it for those values that show what it might become. You have to have enough love of learning to have the courage to remake it, imagine it, and teach it (p. 190)."

It is this sentiment and urgency of hope for growth and change that compels me in my practice as an educator. This leads me to consider what is the object of this thesis and in the next section, I examine the methodology that has assisted me in investigating how teachers in the system have come to realize their own visions to social justice, including the barriers and limitations to them throughout their lived lives as teachers. In the next chapter I examine the research methodology and methods of this study, as well as narrative concepts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NARRATIVE INQUIRY: THE STORIES WE LIVE BY.

#### **Introduction**

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in education and social sciences with intellectual roots in the humanities and narratology – the study and theory of narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber, et.al., 2013). Narrative inquiry is the study of stories and re-telling lived experiences, as to provide a context for understanding personal, communal, and systemic issues. Humans live storied lives, and narrative inquiry gives a research context for exploring how humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Differing from other research qualitative methodologies, narrative inquiry has value for people's everyday lived experiences, and explores the social, cultural, linguistic, and institutional narratives that shape lived experiences (Clandinin et al., 2010). Narrative inquiry focuses on the researcher and participant storying their experiences together. Participants are to be understood on their own terms, and in whichever way they frame their experiences. The purpose of narrative inquiry is not to find conclusive data, but to reveal stories of one's experience. Stories are told about oneself, about others, and about the world around us (Polkinghorne, 1996). As Battiste and Henderson (2000) explained, stories "are enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experiences; they also renew, awaken, and honor spiritual forces. Hence, almost every ancient story does not explain; instead it focuses on the process of knowing" (p. 77). That is to say, stories are crucial in understanding one's experiences and their relations with others in a holistic lifelong journey through time, space and society. Furthermore, the ability to remember and understand stories is developed at an early age, and appears to be universal to human beings

(Bruner, 1990), though usually culturally embedded and retained by way of written and oral formats (Polkinghorne, 1996). Moreover, stories not only help us understand our own experiences, but also help us to understand lived experiences that are different from our own. Stories help us bridge the distance between different experiences, develop empathy, raise awareness, and create communities (Whang, 2012).

The role of the narrative researcher is to study stories gathered from people, orally or written (Polkinghorne, 2007), and to gain wisdom by discerning patterns to find deep meaning amongst the varied experiences (Bateson, 2000). Sharing stories, whether in teaching or learning, is both normal and essential because it is a way for cultures to express their reality and values, process culture, and transmit knowing to each generation. Cultures, whether dominant or marginalized, find value in stories, for it is in the discourses, and communications formed among groups that transmit ideologies, values and practices, and maintain ideas and beliefs that support cultures as well as their positions and localities in society. Stories also hold discourses, and communications by dominant power groups create a cultural imperialistic stream for education that ignores and erodes other knowledge systems (Battiste, 2013) and permits and maintains the alienation of students of non-hegemonic groups.

### **History of Narrative Inquiry**

Throughout time, human beings have always told stories as a way to understand and make meaning of their experiences. While storytelling is an old practice, it may feel new as Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) wrote:

Human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways . . . we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities. What feels new is the emergence of narrative methodologies in the field of social science

research. With this emergence has come intensified talk about our stories, their function in our lives, and their place in composing our collective affairs (pp. 35–36).

In other words, the understanding of the contributions that narrative inquiry can make within the realm of social sciences is still being developed and understood. An early form of narrative inquiry has come from the study of narratology, often used in relation to literary theory and criticism (Huber, et. al. 2013). In the 1960s and 1970s French structuralists were engaged in work regarding understanding and/or applying universal structures to various cultural examinations of myth and inquiring into sociolinguistic studies of oral stories (Huber, et. al. 2013). These literary investigations and their resulting concepts developed from the study of narrative structures within literature that remain identifiable in the work of narrative theorists who maintain a focus on literary aspects of narrative in research (Huber, et. al. 2013). The study of narratives was also at the forefront of the work of philosophers, psychotherapists, historians, linguistics, theologians, and literary figures (Huber, et. al. 2013).

As narrative research emerged in the social sciences as legitimate forms of data and new forms of analysis of these stories emerged in qualitative research, a significant shift occurred in the research process which made space for narrative inquiry (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As a result of this shift, the focus on people's narratives moved from stories as evidence of experience to the study of experiences itself and the phenomenon of lived lives became the central focus. This experience is understood as the stories people live by (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In this research stories to live by are told through the teacher participant's telling of their development in becoming anti-oppressive educators, their challenges in school systems, and promising practices they are working toward.

One of the most significant changes in narrative inquiry was that of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Previously in human research, participants' responses



were thought to be decontextualized and stagnant (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). These research data, as per their stories or answers to questions, were gathered by asking questions that belonged to and resided in the interests of the researcher, and the answers offered were shared often without a context of their participants' lives. Alternatively, narrative inquiry embraces narratives of experience, shaped by the participant's living and telling, which the researcher then retells, with the possibility for reliving for everyone (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and shaped by the relational roles and interactions between the researcher and the participant (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In this way, the researcher is no longer viewing the narratives singularly as data, but the researcher and the participant work together to inform the research, the research questions, even co-authoring at times the outcomes of the experience they share in storying. Other shifts as stated by Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) are as follows: understanding stories as data, acknowledgment of multiple ways of knowing, and gaining an understanding that people have particular experiences rather than a universal experience. Narrative as a method and a methodology is used across numerous fields of study (Huber, et. al., 2013).

The development of narrative inquiry as a research methodology was shaped by the early works of education philosopher John Dewey (1938) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Huber, et. al. (2013) noted that, "For Dewey, education, life, and experience are one and the same. Education is life and life is education, and to study life, to study education, is to study experience" (p. 220). This is to say, one's education (formal and informal) and lived experience are at minimum deeply related, if not synonymous. As educators, if we want learning to be meaningful and impactful, we must acknowledge the experiences of our students and communities.

Two educational philosophers in particular that have shaped their early conception of narrative inquiry are Johnson (1990), whose research is centered in embodied knowing, and

MacIntyre (1981) whose focus is on narrative unity. Clandinin and Connelly (1986) are also acknowledged in the literature as being central to the change in narrative research, especially in areas of teacher education, teacher knowledge, and education as they focus on the experiences, not primarily on their words, inspirations, or researcher's themes (Huber, et. al., 2013). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) believe that narrative inquiry is not only a research methodology, but more so a way of composing a life and of living. I understand this to mean that narrative inquiry values stories from the perspective of lived experiences, as it creates a framework for understanding past, present, and future experiences.

## **Research Approach**

The researcher's role in narrative inquiry is to engage a receptive environment to collect stories of lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry research can be collected by way of the following: field notes of shared experience, journal records, interviews, taped storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, blogs, and other documents such as class plans and newsletters (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In narrative inquiry, questions shift from asking "what?" to asking "how?" This is done through shared storytelling. While narrative inquiry is a mutual effort on both the part of the participant and the researcher, even to the point of co-researching together, it is vital that the participant shares first. Participants have long been silenced in research and must be given space to tell their storied experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). A good narrative is an invitation to participate by way of reading and living vicariously (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As Caine et al. (2016) explained:

In both living alongside and in composing research texts, we become awake to the ways that lives are shifted and, sometimes, to how institutional narratives are shifted. It is

through this knowing about shifting lives—of change—that we contemplate ways in which narrative inquiry constitutes a social justice practice. (p. 3)

It is instrumental that the participant be given a voice as their experience helps the researcher and research field gain understanding of lived experiences that are different from their own. As King (2003) wrote, “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (p. 164). That is to say, if stories and lived experiences are continuously thought of in a singular way, it limits the true understanding of the complexities involved. Stories are necessary in truly understanding experience, and have be used to do so throughout time as noted:

Throughout the ages and across cultures story continues to express the fundamental nature of humanity. Stories are not to be treated lightly as they both carry, and inspire, significant obligations and responsibilities: stories must be cared for as they are at the heart of how we make meaning of our experiences of the world (Huber, et. al., 2003, p. 214).

Ultimately, narrative inquiry is the study of storied experiences, as people’s stories are lived and told, retold, and relived (Clandinin & Connelly 1998).

To decipher narratives of experience, three dimensions of narrative inquiry are important to examine: temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006 ). *Temporality* is discussed as events in process, events past, present, and future in relation to the participants’ lived experiences. *Sociality* is discussed as personal and social attributes of conversation. The personal begins with feelings, hopes, and moral dispositions of both the researcher and the participant.

...central within these relational negotiations within curriculum making were children’s and teacher’s identity making, an understanding which creates a sense of urgency for the co-creation of ‘classroom spaces where teachers might narratively engage with children about who they are and who they are becoming (Huber, Keats Whelan, & Clandinin, 2003, p. 303).

*Social* is the environmental and external factors. Finally, *place*, is discussed as the specific physical boundary of place. An example of this is by Young, et al. (2012), who examined place as places where Aboriginal students lived and where they tell their stories - which is not attended to in public schools, through identity or curriculum.

Since who we are in the world affects our perceptions of the research and engages our research paradigm, it is crucial that the researcher is aware of their identity and social location as the research begins. Research paradigms and ontologies influence how we make decisions and carry out research. In part, these frameworks are formed by a researcher's worldview and assumptions they implicitly or explicitly carry with them regarding various topics (Tuck & Mackenzie, 2015). Teachers that practice social justice pedagogy would be aware of these power inequalities within the educational system, and consequently it is important for me to be aware of how critical theory informs my own research paradigm, as well as the individuals who will be participating in my research (Brenner, 2006). Critical theory is a "specific scholarly approach that explores the historical, cultural, and ideological lines of authority that underlie social conditions" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). By applying critical theory to my research, I can be sensitive to how the research participants may frame their experiences and my responsibilities to be open to these differences.

### **Researcher and Participant Relationship**

The relationship between narrative inquirers and participants are at the heart of narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2010). That is to say, in order for narrative inquiry to occur there must be a relationship of care established between the researcher and the participant. Indeed, this is

important because when both parties share their stories, they can then become stories of empowerment (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). According to Polkinghorne (1996), stories from a conversation or interview are shaped by the questions and responses of the person to whom they are told, resulting in a story that is no longer only the teller's. Additionally, it is also important that the researcher does not have preconceived notions of what the participant's storied experience will be. The starting points for narrative inquiry research must come from the researcher's life and the lives of the participants, rather than problems that need to be inquired into by researcher(s) (Caine et al., 2016):

What we, as narrative inquirers, are arguing is that we are concerned when we begin research with policies and practices rather than with a focus on the lives of people. We are also trying to show that identifying problems without attending to lives first can result in silencing the experiences of participants...Engaging in narrative inquiry offers us possibilities for engaging in social justice practices that are attentive to lives first, with a knowledge that change, however uncertain, does occur (Caine et al., 2016, p. 7).

That is to say, through listening to experiences of participants and attending to people rather than themes, issues, or even questions, meaningful change can then occur.

It is the relationship between the researcher and the participant in which issues of social justice or injustice arise and can be inquired into, and it is within the relationships that we reflect socially just practices (Caine et al., 2016, p. 10). The sharing of stories and lived experiences allows us to be vulnerable with one another, which awakens us to experiences other than our own. This in turn prompts compassion for the lives of other people. Looking at the experiences of ourselves and others also gives us a framework for understanding how social and institutional change might be made. Through storied experiences we can also de-colonize history that has shaped identity, curriculum, and school systems. This impacts how we view people and relationships of the past, present, and where we can move to in the future (Young, et.al., 2012). As Caine, et al. (2016) wrote, "...as we think about our obligations and responsibilities as

narrative inquirers, obligations and responsibilities in which thinking narratively makes visible ways in which narrative inquiry is a continuous endeavor toward social justice” (Caine et al., 2016, p. 8).

### **Ethics in Narrative Inquiry**

The ethical considerations I will abide by will be in accordance with the Belmont Report, *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*, by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1978). The Belmont Report outlines three basic principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. I will be conducting respect for persons by having the participants treated as autonomous agents. To treat the educators of my inquiry with respect means to “give weight to their views and their choices” (Strike, 2006, p. 68). Additionally, all participants will have autonomy by volunteering informed consent. I will be executing beneficence in my study by minimizing possible harm, and maximizing possible benefits (Strike, 2006). Additional ethics I will abide by are in accordance with the American Educational Research Association, and are as follows: “Researchers must respect the policies and research guidelines of those institutions in which they do research. They should be sensitive to religious, gender, and cultural differences, and they should respect the integrity of ongoing activities. Researchers should not exploit subjects or coerce their participation. Researchers should avoid treatments with harmful consequences, such as withholding some portion of the curriculum. Researchers should adequately communicate their findings to research populations and stakeholders” (Strike, 2006, p. 70). I will also be complying with the research policies and procedures that are outlined by the

University of Saskatchewan. The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board gave approval of this research on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018.

### **The Research Process**

The purpose and objective of this research is to inquire into the lived experiences of educators who are working in or have worked in schools promoting social justice in various ways, including disrupting dominant discourses and normalizing counter hegemonic discourses as ways to achieve social just practices. Their experiences would then offer perspectives and stories about how to build upon or find promising practices in anti-oppressive education.

### **Procedures**

Participants have been identified as Saskatchewan educators with a minimum of five years of experience in elementary or secondary schools, an educational background in antiracist education and identify as having a socially-just pedagogy. There are two participants I chose based on these criteria. I had known both participants through a combination of professional growth networks, post-secondary education, and teaching experiences. Participants were invited individually and given the opportunity to read and listen to the research project and its broad purposes and anticipated outcomes. I shared my story of how this research evolved and presented the research consent protocols as part of the Human Research Ethics process of the University of Saskatchewan. After participants learned of my study, asked questions of the process, expectations and other timing issues, agreed and signed the consent form, a location of the first and subsequent meetings and conversations were discussed and determined by mutual consent of each of them and myself.

The research involved an open-ended dialogue between the participants and myself pertaining to the research topic. We met individually once a week for a one-hour duration over the course of one month (4 sessions). With permission from the participants, the conversations were audio recorded and transcriptions created from them. The audio recordings are protected in a password protected computer and/or recording device and only myself and thesis supervisor Dr. Marie Battiste will have access to the transcripts but only for this thesis research purpose. The transcriptions in hard copy and in electronic copy on a USB stick were shared with the participants to review and to edit or modify in whatever way they decided they would like, to decide on themes to discuss further, new and emergent themes, or to add more of their narrative to clarify or to accurately communicate their lived experiences. Participants then signed the transcript release form after they had an opportunity to clarify, add or edit their transcript, to show their acceptance of the modified transcripts.

### **Potential Risks and Benefits**

This project is perceived as low risk, minimized by careful attention to transcriptions and identifying places that may be contentious, and participants own ability to modify the transcriptions before being used. Participants read through the transcriptions identifying any text they would like removed, edited or modified in the transcripts so as to minimize or eliminate any risks to them in their work or with the staff members of the schools where they work or worked. Strategies used to minimize or manage the risks for participants included the use of pseudonyms for anonymity, which they chose after the study was completed. They had the option to keep their own name in the study, as provided in the entrance to the study, with the option that they may choose to do that at any time before the thesis is presented as final and published on the



University of Saskatchewan library database. Participants were encouraged to only answer those questions that they were comfortable with.

The intended benefits of this research are to inquire into promising practices in anti-oppressive education so that more educators may develop instructional or pedagogical tools for creating socially just environments for students and communities. The focus of the research then is on the participant's lived life as a teacher and to the conventional systems in which they work to discover how they stimulate, operate within, or manage social justice as a teacher in the schools.

### **Confidentiality**

Participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the research project anytime without consequence. They were made aware that their participation and their possible withdrawal was allowed, and that his/her data would be deleted from the research project and destroyed, if desired. They were further made aware that when data collection was complete and no longer required for the study, it would be destroyed after the required 5 years of it being held after the thesis was completed. For participants who requested confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms would be immediately applied to the interview transcripts and to the metadata associated with the audio recordings of the interviews and transcripts (i.e. labelling on documents). Public reports of the research findings that invoke participants are by the pseudonym they chose and identifying data is further removed related to demographic or contextual information that could be used to re-identify them. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout as participants have also had the opportunity to review their transcripts and the final draft of the thesis. Participants are encouraged to edit or remove portions of their responses, or a

portion of their responses, to remain confidential. They were advised that if they choose to remain anonymous in the research, their name would not be linked to their interview responses at any time and not mentioned or thanked by name. Participants would only be linked by name to the responses they choose to have associated with their identity in the final report.

To protect participant confidentiality and/or anonymity, including, the storage of audiotapes, and transcripts, the audiotapes and transcripts will remain stored in a password protected computer. Identifiers to the participants, their location, or their situated identity in the transcripts will be identified and removed, or modified per their request. The research project results and associated material will be safeguarded and securely stored by the faculty member/researcher at the University for a minimum of five years post publication. When the data is no longer required, it will then be appropriately destroyed and deleted. The data from this research project may be published and also presented at conferences; however, participant identity remains confidential at all times, unless they choose otherwise. Although I will report direct quotations from the interview, they will be given a chosen pseudonym, and all identifying information (such as the name of the institution, their position etc.) removed from the report. After the interview, and prior to the data being included in the final thesis, participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as they see fit. An audiotape recording device will be used. Participants may request that the recording device be turned off at any time.

In the next two chapters I explore the narrative experiences of the teacher participants and my own as I draw out narrative threads from their stories.

## CHAPTER THREE.

### COMING TO BE AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE: JENNY'S NARRATIVE.

#### A PLACE OF BELONGING.

##### Introducing Jenna

*I remember one particular Sunday, and it's actually when I quit going to church for a really long time. The church secretary's daughter got pregnant; she was a teen. At Sunday morning service she had to get up in front of the entire congregation, and she had to apologize for getting pregnant. She had to admit to getting pregnant and she had to apologize, and she had to ask forgiveness from God and the entire congregation. Meanwhile her boyfriend stood beside her, he had to also be humiliated I think by standing next to her, but he didn't have to speak and he didn't have to say anything. I was sitting there watching the elders of the church, who were all men, stand smugly behind her, and they had advised her that this was something she needed to do to be right with God. It was moments like that were... I was disgusted with things around me and I've just always kind of felt far removed from people. I was looking around me at hundreds of people, like is anyone else having issues with this? That's one of many moments, probably not the first one, where I recognized the unfairness of things. For me anti-oppressive education is that, it's recognizing the unfairness (Jenna transcript, February 12<sup>th</sup>).*

This storied vignette from Jenna gave an introduction to developing an understanding of how she has experienced the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and how this has contributed

to her knowing as an anti-oppressive educator. It is through her lived experience that her educator journey can be framed (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Jenna is one of two research participants for this study. Both participants were chosen based on the criteria of having five or more years of teaching experience at the secondary level, having an educational background in antiracist education, and identifying as having a socially-just pedagogy.

While working on this research with Jenna, I have seen the commonalities in our coming to be anti-oppressive educators. While our experiences have been different, we have both experienced either directly or indirectly events of injustice that have compelled us to want to strive toward equitable treatment for people. These social, cultural, and institutional experiences have shaped our value of anti-oppressive education (Clandinin et al., 2010). Similarly, to myself, Jenna spoke of having experiences in her childhood that she felt were unjust. She believed she had an innate feeling of experiences being unfair, and the need to combat those events. She also recalls feeling excluded and disruptive in relation to those around her for not being willing to abide by practices of the status quo. Jenna stated,

I feel like I've finally found my place to fit in. I have been told my whole life – I realize this is my disposition – but I've always looked at things and thought this is so unfair. People always say, well life isn't fair, and I think why can't it be. It should be. I've been the black sheep of my family, and my friend groups (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

Her experience resonated as I inquired into my own experience alongside hers (Clandinin, 2006). I have also found that coming from a middle-class white family studying in anti-oppressive education, I am at times seen as combative, particularly in terms of anti-racist education. There is a constant rift among family and friends who feel uncomfortable with concepts of injustice due to race, class, sexuality, gender, and ability. It is interesting to me to hear her experiences similar to my own (Clandinin & Connelly, 1986), to realize that the frustrations of being an anti-

oppressive educator are not limited to barriers of the classroom or school system, but are much wider in terms of family and community norms.

Jenna described feeling alienated in her beliefs of inequality and injustice until she found a community of other anti-oppressive educators. She stated, “I haven’t felt like it is okay until I started connecting with like-minded people. Finally, I feel like I have people who get there’s like a moral imperative to make the world a better place” (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>). This was a part of my experience as well, but I can recall feeling included at various parts of my learning. One identifiable moment for me was discovering the field of sociology in my first year of post-secondary education. Secondly, was when I learned about the department of Educational Foundations. Then finally, discovering groups such as SAFE (Saskatchewan Anti-oppressive Anti-racist Forum on Education), and then building a community for myself of people with similar aims. This feeling of belonging has been paramount to me in being able to feel supported in anti-racist anti-oppressive educational aims. Jenna also described that it was not until adulthood that she gained the language and a framework to understand her experiences and events she had witnessed. She stated, “My political opinions have changed since I’ve become more educated. I’ve been more open to understanding and trying to understand where other people are coming from (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).” This analysis for her was gained largely through post-secondary education and graduate studies, particularly in moments where she was asked to confront her own biases (Kumashiro, 2004).

Both of the research participants in this study come from similar social locations as myself. The three of us have all experienced society as middle-class white women. While our experiences in childhood have included only minor injustices, this has contributed to our ability to fathom that inequalities and injustices exist for people with experiences other than our own.

Through storying our experiences together, we have been able to find meaning in our varied experiences (Bateson, 2000; Caine et al., 2016). Similar to Jenna, it is through a process of unpacking what I have learnt through social systems, especially family, that have helped to form my understanding of injustice. It is through formal education and lived experiences that these socialized perceptions, especially those to do with racism, have been disrupted and informed (Huber, et. al., 2013).

While Jenna had perceptions of conflict due to value differences within her family, she also recalls learning about understanding injustice through her father. She recalls a story from her childhood where her father acted to fight back against someone who was being assaulted. She relayed her father's story,

There was a guy getting beat up by these two guys because he was gay... he (her dad) stopped what he was doing and he just ran across the street and came to this man's aid. He got into a fist fight with these two other people and got them off of the guy. Most people I think stay silent and it takes more character to stand up and use your privilege to keep other people safe (Jenna transcript, February 12<sup>th</sup>).

In this story to live by, Jenna remembers learning from her dad about the importance of reacting to injustices. This story from her father's lived experience has helped her to create a framework in understanding her duty and obligation related to injustice (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). I, as well, have memories of these teachings from my own parents, teachings such as, "Treat everyone as you would like to be treated." However, even in my childhood I could recognize there was a discrepancy to whom this sentiment should be applied. I grew up in a family and community that had a range from co-vert to overt racism. I could recognize that I was being taught to only treat people kindly that looked like me. These teachings both implicitly and explicitly taught have impacted my worldview and learning (Tuck & Mackenzie, 2015).

Unpacking how these discrepancies have been taught have been nuanced and compelling for me to begin to understand.

### **Promising Practices**

Jenna is a home economics teacher, and shared some of the ways she has an anti-oppressive teaching practice. In a discipline that is traditionally not taught to be critical of power structures or oppression, she notes that it is important to understand the ways that home economics has been pivotal to liberate people. An example she cites is the influence of home economics in women's movements, getting women into higher education, and fighting for rights. This is particularly relevant as identity making by curriculum shapes a life of a student (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). She also discusses that home economics can be oppressive in many ways, that it is for white middle-class women, led by white middle-class women. Jenna stated,

I have a friend from Nigeria who told me about his experiences going to school and learning in terms of how to teach home economics and it was very much different from the Canadian perspective... it omits other peoples' ways of doing things. For me anti-oppressive education is that there's no one particular right way of doing things. There's no grand narrative to me, and that's what home economics teaches. If you even think about cooking techniques. They're all based on French practices and there are other cultures that have gotten along just fine without French cooking techniques. They've still developed their own amazing cuisine without. We just don't acknowledge that really, and that's what our content is based on that we deliver to kids (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

The profession of teaching and public care giving has been common place for middle-class white women, both historically and presently. This role has been premised on replacing marginalized identities with dominant norms of white middle-class understandings (Schick, 2000), in order to protect the interests of privileged groups (Orlowski, 2011). Teaching practices that do not disrupt dominant norms both alienate students, and erode other ways of knowing (Little Bear, 2000; Cajete, 2005; St. Denis, 2008; Battiste, 2013).

Jenna shared that one of the ways she disrupts dominant discourses in her classroom is by teaching students to think critically. She guides them to ask questions about who has power in situations, who might be benefitting, and whose voices are being omitted (Cochran-Smith, 1999; St. Denis, 2007). According to Jenna, students should be wary of the various information they receive. It is also important for anti-oppressive educators to model this process for students. By guiding students to think critically, they are then able to apply that same learning strategy to their other courses, even when it is not explicitly being taught or required. She also notes that teaching students to think critically would be made easier by a curriculum that is supportive. While teachers are able to make connections across curriculums that support anti-oppressive teaching, it would be beneficial - especially for teachers without anti-racist and anti-oppressive education – to have direct curricular objectives that reflect non-dominant discourses. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2017) and the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission (2017) both support the need for inclusion in education; however, direct curricular support of these aims is still necessary.

Jenna also states that she believes anti-oppressive education should be taught in every subject. Furthermore, every teacher needs anti-oppressive education in order to support students in being critical of dominant norms and the status quo (Bell & Desai, 2011). Jenna explained:

When you're starting from scratch with a group of students that have never been asked to challenge what they're viewing or listening to or seeing, they don't really know how to do it - and just when you get to the point where they're able to do it well then you're done the semester with them and you'll never see them again" (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

This observation of Jenna's I have found to also be relevant in my experiences. This last year I was given the opportunity to observe adult understanding of systemic oppression and marginalization in a course aimed at educating about teacher identity and anti-oppressive



contexts. During this time, I noted a wide variance in their understanding of oppression and marginalized groups, largely based on the prior education the adult learners had received from kindergarten to grade twelve. Learners that had previous education on the topic were able to develop their learning to a far more advanced level of understanding. A foundation of anti-oppressive knowing affects how students interact in our society as citizens, hopefully in a socially just manner (Bell & Desai, 2011).

Jenna stated that one of the biggest challenges is connecting with students and getting them to engage in the material they are learning about. She believes from her experience it is because students' values are based on their ability to succeed in a colonial education system that does not account for diverse ways of engaging with the material. Jenna stated:

I think their minds are brilliant and they're intelligent people, we talk about really deep social issues and yet one of them in particular is failing all her classes. It's because the system is failing her, she's not failing the system (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

In my experience as an educator and a student, I have also known this to be a barrier in our education system. In my experience, students are enthusiastic about learning that is relevant to their lives, and when material is connected to their experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Particularly, students are engaged when they are given the opportunity to show their learning in a way that is of interest to them, plays to their strengths, offers a variety of participation styles, and information exchanges (Battiste, 2013). My experience as student has been similar. My own academic success has been directly linked to opportunities to engage in studies that are relevant to me and my knowing, rather than subject matter that is imposed on me without room for connecting who I am as a person to the material. To teach to the whole of a student is a decolonized form of education, that validates all students and supports lifelong learning (Battiste, 2013).

Jenna shared with me that she believes when students are engaged in their learning, they become passionate and connected to societal issues. She explained that students need to see the relevance of issues and how it connects to the world around them (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In her experience teaching in the classroom, there are many students who understand the issues being taught, but are unmotivated and apathetic in how they themselves could engage within these contexts. She stated that in her experience most students will accept what she is teaching for the sake of doing well on an assignment or exam, but in order to be transformative in student lives teachers must give students compelling reasons for why they should care about participating in society in a socially just way. Jenna was hopeful that by the end of term she will be able to work on improving this aspect with students. She discusses that one way she will try to ignite passion in students is for them to see that she herself is passionate about current societal issues.

Some ways that Jenna stated that she attempts to engage students in learning is by teaching content that is relevant in the world around them. For example, she talked about teaching students about water issues in Indigenous communities, and how in Canada there are many people that do not have clean drinking water. She stated that food sovereignty is another issue that many students know little about. She explains,

We live in a food system where people know very little about the food that they're eating... we're having an increasing obesity epidemic because there's major corporations filling the processed foods that most people consider normal with fat sugar and salt... There are people in control of our lives who make policies and set the course of our lives who are making decisions for us with very little input from the average person (Jenna transcript, February 12<sup>th</sup>).

One of the ways she explained she tries to engage students about these issues is by appealing to their emotional understanding. She said that she believes sharing stories about issues is an effective way to help students engage in topics. She believes that this helps students to extend

beyond their own personal experiences. Ultimately, she hopes that this will make for more active and engaged citizens.

Jenna also explains that she believes students lack engagement because of the stage of life they are experiencing. She believes that as educators we at times do not consider that students could not be engaged because of emotional and mental state they experience as youth in our society. Jenna encourages educators to be aware that there are additional aspects to a student's life beyond what is happening in the classroom. Educators should consider that students may be having issues at home, struggles with peer groups, and are generally fighting for independence. She explained,

They're struggling for independence and they have a different way of seeing things. I think that's why teens rebel because they're so good at seeing the inherent unfairness of our world, and they point it out, but it's this weird time because they don't know what to do about it (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

Acknowledging students holistically for who they are as a whole, and what experiences they may be having is paramount to their learning. Ultimately, students need to experience relevant, engaging, and empowering learning opportunities that provide supportive relationships and community (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Greene, 2000; Sleeter, 2008).

A promising practice in anti-oppressive education that Jenna endeavors toward is having students form educated opinions. She shared with me that she believes when students have an opinion without it being grounded in facts or information is when biases get perpetuated. She has found that often students have the same biases that their families have. Even if the student opinion is derived from experiences, it can still be based off a narrow experience, which needs to be unpacked and understood through a more in-depth analysis of societal context (McIntosh,

1998) and diverse powers and perspectives within them. This shows the way experiences are situated in grand narratives of familiar, and cultural grand narratives (Clandinin, et. al, 2006). She explains that it is necessary to provide students with material that helps them understand the problem, so they can recognize first hand that their experience may differ from that of another person (Lugones,1987). She drew on her own experience of learning while discussing a time when she was asked to consider experiences other than her own:

I took a class, it was a life history class, and we did these novel circles. That was a neat experience because... to read about someone's experience is a safe way of putting yourself into someone else's shoes. You kind of suspend your own reality and you can accept their experience when you're reading stuff like that. Then being able to talk about it and debrief about it after was really powerful in that experience for me as a student. Often times the way they (peers) viewed what they read was different than the way that I did. I mean it was almost as if there were layers to gaining new perspectives (Jenna transcript, February 12<sup>th</sup>).

This process of uncovering one's own bias is something I recall first doing as a young adult. It was through post-secondary education, and shared stories from friends and community that I was able to do so. Particularly I remember taking a course in Women and Genders Studies titled *Women in Development*. This course was the first time I was introduced to colonialism and my responsibility in a colonial society as a white woman. I recall feelings of discomfort, shame, and guilt. As Jenna noted in her experience, I believe it would be beneficial for myself as an anti-oppressive educator to reflect on my journey of understanding to better facilitate learning journeys for students.

Finally, Jenna discussed the transformational process of her anti-oppressive pedagogy. She asserted that ultimately we as educators need to empower students to be action-based. She explained, "I think it's pretty easy to see how the way that we're living as a society is not sustainable. It's not equitable. It's not fair. Kids get that, I think more than adults" (Jenna

transcript, March 12<sup>th</sup>). It has been my experience teaching youth that many students have experienced various types of prejudice by virtue of their age, for example being followed in stores with the assumption that they will steal or cause a disturbance. Therefore, students are often able to imagine how someone else may be treated unfairly as well. Jenna also noted that contrarily, there are also students that are invested in protecting their privilege. She explained that she has had students in her class that have biases they are unwilling to address but will feign the process of learning to address them in order to receive a desired mark in the class. She believes that this is evident in the way students connect with the material. She also stated that guiding students to unlearn and re-learn about their biases is a difficult process when educators have such little time with students before they move on to a new course.

While attempting to make the entire education system more socially just, I remember an important point from that experience, that individual actions also have life changing effects on students. Jenna recalled a traumatic event that one of her students shared with her. She explained that one of her students who was transitioning in their gender identity was incredibly upset because another student refused to use their preferred name. It was revealed to Jenna that it was not only other students but former teachers as well that refused to use the student's preferred name. This refusal to acknowledge a student's identity is a micro-aggression on the part of other students and the teachers involved. Children and youth who experience oppression from homophobia, sexism, and racism experience separation from family and community, as well as a diminished belief and confidence in who they are (Wilson, 2008). Educators must be aware of the myriad of harmful consequences brought to youth through all forms of oppression including racism, patriarchy, homophobia, racism, and classism – for at the core is a social construct of learned superiority and inferiority (Battiste, 2013). Jenna stated that she emphasizes in her

teachings the necessity of giving dignity to all people. She believes that some students have this understanding already, but for those who do not, it is our job as educators to develop an understanding of dignity for all with our students.

## **Moving Forward**

While there are many promising practices to be noted, it is important also to mention the supports anti-oppressive educators need in order to move forward in education. One barrier Jenna notes is the conflict that arises among school staff when disrupting the status quo. She explains, “I think being a critical educator, being an anti-oppressive anti-racist educator, means being critical of everything. I think right away that kind of puts us at odds with everyone else that maintains the status quo” (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>). She feels that because critical educators are often the people asking questions about policies and practices, this causes a disturbance among school staff. For example, Jenna recalls a discussion she had with a colleague during a staff activity where they were asked to discuss current events. Her and her colleague were discussing the issue of renaming statues and schools that were originally named after colonial figures. She recalled from her experience,

A history teacher said to me if you remove a statue of John A. Macdonald you’re erasing history. I was flabbergasted a little bit. There’s a need for anti-oppressive education because as much as teachers are well meaning, no one likes to self-reflect, and that’s an important part of being an anti-oppressive educator is confronting your own bias. Teachers don’t like to do that. People don’t like to self-reflect, they think it’s a waste of time. I feel like we have a responsibility to step up and try to wake up other people (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

By way of this, I understand Jenna to mean it is imperative that all teachers be critical and reflective practitioners that are able to recognize their biases and privileges in their teaching practice (Battiste, 2013; Orlowski, 2011). These biases determine how teachers interact with

students, parents, caregivers, other staff, and community (Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Orlowski, 2011). Jenna stated that while teachers are well-meaning, there are still interactions occurring that make students feel devalued. To her, this is evidence that anti-oppressive education is necessary not just for students but also staff. Jenna recalled an additional incident when a student came to her upset, explaining,

I have a student who is a lesbian and she's in cadets and has been for a really long time, and a history teacher told her that women made no valuable contributions to WWII. This kid was so upset she could hardly go to class, she hated going every single day. This person demeaned her and insulted her, and even though it wasn't an individual remark to her person, it's still undervaluing her entire gender (Jenna transcript, January 28<sup>th</sup>).

This is another example of the micro-aggressions teachers invariably communicate to students. Jenna advises that teachers should listen to the students in their classrooms because how they are experiencing the interactions may be different from the perspective of the teacher. She stated that she strives to do this by establishing student teacher relationships that have minimal power imbalances.

Ultimately as educators, we have to understand that the education system is rooted in dominance and oppression, due to white supremacy, Eurocentric languages and knowledge systems, and limited validation to Indigenous knowledge systems in schools (Barman, Hébert & McCaskill, 1986; Peters, 2016). Jenna believes that oppression is deeply entrenched in the day-to-day on-goings of classrooms, and anti-oppressive education is necessary in dismantling that system. Often in education systems there is discussion about educators being facilitators of learning rather than a sole source of information that is deposited to students (Freire, 1921). In order to do this, we need to acknowledge the power and oppression situated in classrooms and school systems. Jenna stated, "I see hypocrisy in the things that we teach kids and the things we say we value. I don't always see us aligning our actions with our values" (Jenna transcript,

January 28<sup>th</sup>). An example she gives of this is regarding the health and nutrition accessible to students in schools. While curricula encourage health and nutrition, she stated that schools surround students with unhealthy food options. She is concerned that we send mixed messages to our students when we as educators and school systems do not practice the values and ideals we claim to abide by.

Finally, Jenna discussed the need for accountability in schools. She stated that she believes while there are some anti-oppressive professional development efforts being made it is not as thorough as needed. Additionally, there needs to be accountability for how that professional development is put into practice, as well as revisiting the learning and checking in with teachers. She believes that there is cynicism among educators regarding professional development because many teachers find that as they move through their careers that the professional development is repetitive and cyclical. Despite this perceived cynicism, it is still imperative that educators understand anti-oppressive education. Schools can either reproduce dominance and the status quo, or they can be agents of change. As Battiste (2013) wrote,

Teaching is the psychology of hope, and hope is a cause and a consequence of action. It prefers participation to observation, and it believes that vast problems can yield to several small solutions. Teaching creates the infrastructure of the art of the impossible (p. 175).

As educators we must realize the role and impact we have on student lives. Not only can we contribute to individual students being validated in their experiences, but we can also educate for a more socially just society.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### COMING TO BE AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE EDUCATOR: RAE'S NARRATIVE.

#### RESISTING INJUSTICE.

##### Introducing Rae

*I think about all these steps that I took to try to understand; it's been a very long road. When I first started out, I started at a school with I would say 30% Indigenous students, and another 10-20 % of students who were immigrants and students of color. There was no resistance, and for the most part anything I was doing was speaking to the experiences of the students that I had. I learned from them because they were writing about their experiences of racism, sexism, and homophobia, and even though I didn't have the language and analysis I knew what that was. What I didn't know was how to place their stories of individual experiences in a larger context, and I could recognize that I needed that skill. That's what propelled me to go back and do a masters, to be able to understand what was happening for my students. (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019)*

In this recollection Rae recalls what prompted her to begin developing an anti-oppressive and anti-racist teaching practice. Through sharing her experiences with me I am able to develop an understanding of how her journey in anti-oppressive teaching has taken form. Rae shared with me that she had been teaching a form of anti-oppressive education during her time interning in rural Saskatchewan. She would teach a form of anti-racist education by looking at the impacts of racism on different communities, beginning with African American people in the United States and connecting it with the experiences of Indigenous people in Saskatchewan and across Canada. In Canada, the state's goal has been to destroy Indigenous identities and communities

(RCAP, 1996; TRC, 2015; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Razack, 2012). Rae stated that she did not feel at the time there were barriers to doing anti-oppressive work because she felt she had agency and power as an individual teaching in her classroom. She also noted that this was partially because she was not teaching about whiteness or white supremacy (Linton, 2006), due to the language and analysis not being accessible to her at that point in her education. Rae shared with me that she would teach about the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people, but not about the benefits for her and her family as white settlers, or power issues. While at the time she did not have an anti-racist analysis, she had taken sociology as an undergraduate student, and had developed an awareness in order to question practices she observed as unjust.

Rae told me that when she first began teaching anti-oppressive education there were no barriers because of the kind of anti-oppressive education she was doing, which lacked a critique of power and dominance. For example, she said she would do sweater drives for low income families that did not have access to clothing. Reflecting back on this experience, she believes that those are the acceptable forms of social justice in schools. She stated that engaging in socially just practices in schools is acceptable as long as the focus is on the deficits of the other (Ladson-Billings, 2005), and not discussing oppression and effects of colonialism (Battiste, 2013). She shared that she believes as long as the work is individualized, contained, and not critiquing power systems, then it is not threatening to whiteness and hegemonic systems. Additionally, she believed she was able to do anti-oppressive teaching unchallenged because she was a white teacher, not realizing the implications for that whiteness at the time (Schick, 2000). She also believes that this was a way for the school to say that they were doing social justice work, without a comprehensive understanding of what it should entail.

Some of the ways Rae recalls teaching in anti-oppressive ways in her early career was by speaking out against oppressive school rules. For example, she recalled her school having a rule where if students had ten absences, they would be required to leave the school. This was at a school where many students travelled back and forth to reserves for various different reasons, and this was a way to marginalize students that needed more time away from school. She recalled another instance of speaking out about inequitable roles within the school. She remembered her experience as the school's student representative council (SRC) advisor. She noticed that the SRC was a largely homogenous group comprised of white middle class students. Furthermore, the requirements for being an SRC member was that students had to achieve an 85% average in their classes, and have three letters of recommendation from their teachers. She had realized that the system had been set up so that particular students would be chosen over and over again. Once Rae became the schools SRC advisor, they did not use that criteria, and instead encouraged students who they felt would be strong leaders to represent the school council, ultimately creating more diversity on the SRC. This story of Rae's experience shows ways that schools can create more equity by revising policies and practices that create unfair advantages or barriers for students (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Diverse student representation in a school's SRC is particularly relevant because SRC's plan school events, pep rallies, and theme days, which ultimately contribute to a school's culture.

### **Promising Practices**

Further into her career, Rae was invited to establish an adult campus where she and her colleagues focused on social justice issues and dismantling the policies and practices that had been marginalizing students in her previous experiences. It was at this time that she decided to do a master's degree in anti-racism. During this time, she recalled feelings of sadness and guilt

when she was awakened to the language and analysis of how she was implicated and complicit in white supremacy (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004). She stated that this experience of understanding how she was situated in oppression was very difficult for her, but that she had teachers that were gentle in guiding her through this process. A significant part of my learning journey in anti-oppressive education has been due to friends, mentors, and professors that were generous, kind, and patient in sharing their knowledge and experiences with me. They have been a support to me especially when grappling with concepts that invoke sadness and shame. I hope that continuing to work and teach in anti-oppressive education honors their knowing that they have shared with me.

After completing her master's degree, Rae went back to teaching high school where she created a course in two schools in which she taught anti-racism. She shared that she knows of former students who learned about anti-racism with her that are still involved in social justice work today. She stated that at this time she did encounter some resistance from the white students that she was teaching. However, most students have been enthusiastic about the work, with barriers coming from mostly individual teachers or administrators. At the time of her experience she had supportive administration, so if a challenge did arise she was able to continue teaching anti-racism with the support of the school. She continued teaching anti-racism in her school until an administrator came that did not support anti-racism aims. It is my experience as well that having a supportive administrative team is necessary in being able to do anti-oppressive teaching. Even if course content meets curricular outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2009), administrative support is still necessary in terms of school activities, field trips, guest speakers, community involvement, and alike meaningful learning that goes beyond the classroom. Additionally, these aspects of pedagogy all contribute to a de-colonized form of education

(Battiste, 2013). When administrators have a background in these areas, it is easier to find support and value for anti-oppressive work.

Later, Rae was moved to another high school where she continued to teach her anti-racism course for another six years. She noted that there are students from her teaching experience at this school that are again still involved in social justice work. However, she stated that at this school there were occasional issues, even though the school would be considered progressive. Again, she cited the importance of having supportive administration. She stated that at this time she had gained stronger pedagogy in being able to comfort and guide people through the process of understanding how they are situated in narratives and discourses of racism. Rae stated the importance of having people in school systems that do anti-oppressive work,

I have a huge amount of students on my Facebook that I still talk to that will periodically write on my Facebook or inbox me saying, “you got me through high school” or “your course saved my life” or whatever, so we have to realize that having people with an anti-racist analysis or at least an understanding of their own positioning and the importance of supporting Indigenous students can actually be life-saving and can support students through school (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

At times, doing anti-oppressive education can feel frustrating because there are many systemic changes that need to be made that can feel overwhelming for individual teachers. While the need for curriculum, policy, and staff education is needed for institutional change, individual teachers can still greatly impact the lives of students whom they teach. This note from Rae’s experience will be important to carry with me in my own teaching journey, as there is still great value to be found in giving support to individual students.

One strategy Rae has used in teaching anti-racism is critiquing and applying analysis to resources that are normally used in schools. She would have them ask questions about whose voices are missing from the resources, or have them create their own chapter in a text book. Rae

would also bring in films or guest speakers that had alternative narratives to those traditionally told in resources (Battiste, 2013; Orlowski, 2011). Rae attributed her creativity as a way to overcome barriers in anti-racist education. Indeed, she also cautions future beginning anti-oppressive educators, that there are implications for teaching beyond the status quo, and seeking employment may be more difficult. Rae stated, “I was already inside the system and had a reputation before I started this arc, this journey. My interest in justice was safe from the system for a really long time, it’s not anymore, but it was” (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019). In my own experience, protecting my future employment was something I was cognizant of when I first began interning, knowing that I may not be hired due to having an anti-oppressive teaching practice. However, I feel that for myself, knowing about the injustices that exist and that are maintained in our schools and society, staying silent is not an option, regardless of consequence. Especially as a white teacher, I believe it is our duty to reduce harm done to marginalized students and advocate for equitable learning opportunities – this includes giving value, care, and dignity to all students.

Rae stated that in her 15 years of teaching anti-racism in high schools, her experience was that Indigenous students, students of color, and white students alike approached the learning with openness and excitement. I have also found that in my experience teaching, students are wanting a language and analysis in order to understand their own experiences and the events that occur around them. Rae believes that one reason they are engaged is because it is new to them. Students are consistently given the same monolithic and Eurocentric grand narrative across all subjects from grades k-12 (Cajete, 1995; Battiste & Henderson, 2009). She stated,

...They get fed a particular narrative to them over and over again in every course of white scientists, white writers, white historians, of this palatable Canadian state and I’m talking

about not just in the humanities where obviously that's the main diet of white hetero-patriarchy and acceptance and normalizing it (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

Rae believes that this singular narrative is purposeful so that students do not question the hetero-normative, patriarchal, and racist discourses that surround them in the school system (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). She explained to me that this both saddens and scares her because students are being taught not to think critically about the world around them, and that this has dangerous outcomes. I know from my own teaching experience it has been difficult initially to teach students to think critically. This is not because they do not have the capacity to do so, but because often it was their first time being asked to think beyond having one correct answer as a solution. It is unfortunate that there are high school students that have gone their entire education without being asked to think critically about their resources and the world around them, and it is our job as educators to remedy this practice. Once students were able to shift their thinking from searching for "the right answer" to developing their own thoughts and analysis and creativity, they were then excited to use this skill throughout their learning.

Rae stated that history teachers in particular are trained to maintain a hegemonic narrative of history in Canada. She stated that this is evident because the positions of teaching history, authoring of textbooks, and curriculum development are predominately held by white men. Furthermore, these hegemonic narratives maintain and justify inequities (Schick, 2014; TRC, 2015). She believes that through these strategies, schools are able to maintain the celebratory nature of our country, and continue to erase colonialism, colonial violence, and genocide (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Battiste, 2013). She believes that teachers can be responsible for protecting and upholding those narratives, and schools as a whole act as a socializing mechanism. Educators must have a consciousness and commitment to understanding these mechanisms in order to diminish inequalities (Cochran-Smith, 1999). From Rae's perspective

this is why schools are an important place to think and talk about social justice. She also stated that she was able to work the current curriculum by showing students how inequitable policies and practices have developed over time and ways in which they are now maintained. This can offer powerful learning for students and shift their worldview, particularly in understanding Canada's practices of racism both currently and historically (St. Denis, 2007).

While reflecting on her previous practice as an anti-oppressive educator, Rae noted some things she wished she would have done differently in her teaching. For example, she discussed that in doing anti-oppressive work, educators are required to critique narratives and see problematic behavior. In doing so, this can cause educators to be critical of their peers and thus distance themselves or be distanced. She believes she became adversarial rather than inviting people into her practice. She encourages anti-oppressive educators to be aware that it is a long process of learning and to have patience and compassion for their peers. She stated, "...to try and be tough on the issues, soft on people. That's what I was told by an activist a long time ago." (Rae transcript, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019). She advises that it is important to see anti-oppressive learning as a lifelong journey and that people cannot do the work alone, they need a network. Rae suggested starting in one's own classroom, and developing a relationship with students where teaching and learning exists mutually together (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Greene, 2000; Sleeter, 2008). Then she suggested trying to grow that same community with colleagues, and thinking about ways to invite them into the work and continue in spite of barriers.

Rae stated part of the reason she was able to teach anti-racism without significant barriers from administration was because she was mostly teaching Indigenous students and students of color. She believes there was a deficit thinking about what those students were able to achieve (Ladson-Billings, 2005), so there was little concern for how or what they were being taught. She



again attributes her whiteness for why her teaching practice did not receive more criticism stating, "...the assumption was that whatever I was doing was amazing because I'm white and passionate about teaching and well whatever they get is fine because they're not really worth it anyway" (Rae transcript, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019). Rae stated that she also had freedom with white advanced students because it was perceived those students would be successful regardless of what was being taught. She cautioned that if there is a class of predominantly white students learning about whiteness and white supremacy, there is going to be discomfort, at this point parents and administration are likely to question some anti-racist teachings. Ultimately, she stated that the best course of action is to explain to students, parents, and administration that discomfort is a part of the learning so that learners are prepared for those feelings (Kumashiro, 2004). She explained that she has only been challenged by parents of students a couple of times, but said depending on the school community, it can be a problem. Additionally, she stated that there can be consequences but it hopefully does not stop people from taking up anti-oppressive teaching. She reflected on her responsibilities,

I think the consequences we have as dominant group members are so small compared to the consequences for Indigenous communities. I never felt sorry for myself with the consequences I have for the work that I do. People die. I just try to remember that the consequences I face are nothing compared to the violence Indigenous people face. That's what keeps me going. And knowing I have a responsibility to use the knowledge from so many indigenous teachers (Rae transcript, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

This lesson from Rae is one that I will also take with me moving forward in my teaching journey. Teachers have a duty to not only attend to the needs of the students in their care, but also to honor the knowledge and experiences of those educators and mentors that have come before them.

## **Moving Forward**

One way that Rae suggests supporting teachers in anti-oppressive education is by creating teacher timetables that allow for a focus on improving pedagogy. That is to say, allowing teachers time in a day to reflect and re-work lessons and assignments to better suit the needs of students. Rae explains that often in Saskatoon high schools class sizes are large, and new teachers are given a variety of different courses to teach, on top of being responsible for extracurricular activities. Because of this timetable and expectations of new teachers, there is no room for analysis or creativity in finding connections to problematic curriculum. Rae stated that in her experience most teachers were unable to change their practice until about five years into teaching, and even then it would be only moderate changes. This is true especially if a teacher has children of her own or another part-time job, having the time to de-construct status quo teaching practices is next to impossible. She stated that she felt like in her first few years of teaching she was in survival mode. She explained,

When you're in survival mode you're so thankful for that binder and have something to photocopy and distribute and have something they can talk about and you just don't really get creative until a little bit later on. So, our new teachers that are going to get into the humanities and particular social studies, would need for admin to make that a priority (Rae transcript, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

It is important that teachers are given time to think deeply about these issues and have opportunities for more training and professional development. Rae's observation is consistent with my own experience as a first-year teacher. I was given a variety of courses to teach, large class sizes, and extra-curricular commitments at the school. It was difficult to formulate an anti-oppressive teaching practice as I had to create most of my own teaching resources. Usually first year teachers are encouraged to borrow resources from other teachers to make the experience of

first year teaching less daunting. However, it was my experience that there were limited resources being used that I felt disrupted the status quo.

Another recommendation Rae would like to see moving forward in schools is embracing the growth of anti-oppressive education. She recalled times in her experience where she would try to network with other teachers and schools, and those efforts would be contained to one or two teachers. She explained that students would be comfortable in her class space, but would tell her about the sexism, racism, and homophobia they encountered in the greater school and community. This prompted Rae to aim for larger forms of education and networking with other teachers in the system. She recalled a time when she attempted to organize an event with gay straight alliances from other schools so that they could communicate their experiences and what they would like to see happen in school environments. She explained that these efforts were immediately shutdown by administration, and that she was shocked and disappointed that their communications with one another was perceived as threatening to the school. Yet, as she noted, the school will allow gay straight alliances to do token things like bake pink cupcakes or put up balloons once a year. Those acts of tokenism are not helpful and still become the substance of social justice work generally, which she believes is purposeful as they do not result in systemic change.

Rae believes there are now more barriers to anti-oppressive work that were not present when she first began teaching. She believes that social justice work is now seen as a threat to the colonial and patriarchal nature of schools (Barman, Hébert & McCaskill, 1986; Peters, 2016). Rae explained that teacher training, resources, and the hierarchal nature of schools are holding more closely to maintain colonialism (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Battiste, 2013). She believes that when she first started teaching, there was little real or perceived threat to dismantling these

systems. She says that she sees evidence of this through the blocking out of teachers that want to do anti-oppressive work, and shutting down conversations pertaining to it. She also explained that some of the barriers are created in schools' appropriating social justice work by focusing on students' cultural identities. She stated that for the most part "the boards across Saskatchewan are okay to have a powwow once a year. They're fine to have people come in and teach a little bit about Indigenous culture as long as it doesn't take up too much space" (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019). She feels that it is when conversations of power, race, violence, or colonialism emerge, then school boards are no longer supportive. She explained that it is not enough to just pretend to do social justice work, we must do authentic work for students and communities. Ultimately, tokenism in anti-oppressive education makes people feel that they are doing their part to combat injustice, while not committing to meaningful action. This results in continued marginalization for students and communities.

Finally, Rae explained that while the importance of an individual teacher in their classroom teaching about social justice is important, it is still only affecting 30 or so students out of a school of maybe 1500. Those individual spaces are important, but they do not change the entire school or school system. For large change to occur in social justice, school systems need to make constructive efforts toward considering social justice in their hiring practices, their curriculum, and their pedagogies to address the way students are perceived and treated. She also encourages individual teachers' knowledge building about anti-racist education stating,

You never know who you're going to hit, you never know by continuing to teach anti-racism what you might change, or what students might take it up in a new way. I think you never know, maybe it'll change the way somebody's treated. Maybe it'll change the harm that's done to Indigenous students, maybe it'll change the way one person looks at the world, you never know. But we know it's not enough (Rae transcript, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

While the individual efforts made by teachers in their classrooms are important, there are further steps that need to be taken in school systems to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to learn in a way that is dignified and values their experiences.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TEACHERS' LIVED AND TOLD STORIES, IN PURSUIT OF SOCIALLY JUST SCHOOLS

Chapter one of this thesis began with a narrative of my own coming to be an anti-oppressive educator. It highlights moments of my own experiences with social inequities, and tensions in education that have informed my teaching practice and the research inquiry. I sought out to ask two research wonders-- how have the participants come to know anti-oppressive education? How have they been supported in their practice? Following this narrative beginning, the chapter explored the educational meaning of social justice, ways superiority and dominance are enforced in educational systems, what my social positioning is in relation to dominant systems, as well as relevant research literature. Ultimately this frames the necessity for social justice education, which ensures all students have an opportunity to succeed in their learning in way that is valuing and dignified to their identity.

Chapter two focused on the research methodology of narrative inquiry, which is the process of sharing stories of lived experiences between the researcher and participant as a process of making meaning of lived lives. The stories gathered in narrative inquiry are then discerned through temporality, sociality, and place. Through sharing our stories together, we were able to find support, encouragement, and emergent promising practices moving forward with our stories to live by. It also explored a history of Narrative Inquiry, the research approach, and the researcher and participant relationship. It also included the research process, procedures, and ethical considerations of this research.

Chapter three and four inquired into the lived experience of the teacher participants. Chapter 3 explored Jenna's experience as an anti-oppressive educator and highlighted her current

teaching strategies to engage students in critical and engaged thinking on social issues. Chapter 4 explored the experience of Rae in anti-racist anti-oppressive education, as she reflects and develops her practice over a lifetime of teaching. Rae told of her experiences disrupting dominance, and ways that can be done effectively and compassionately. This chapter inquired into the ways participants have come to know anti-oppressive education, how they practice anti-oppressive pedagogy in their classrooms, as well future steps needed to move forward in supporting teachers in teaching anti-oppressive education. Throughout this research I learned from the participant experiences that were different from my own and felt kinship and encouragement in the experiences that were similar, and the responsibilities they assumed to help students and teachers come to challenge race, class, and gender in their teaching roles. Through sharing our stories together, we were able to build trust and vulnerability that enabled us to share both success and critique.

This chapter (chapter five) explores common concerns and stories of the teacher participants, as well as the social significance and future implications of anti-oppressive education. The chapter also contains a reflection of my experiences in the research process and finishes with research wonders that have emerged from this study.

### **Common Concerns**

While each participant has their own unique understanding, and practice of anti-oppressive education, there were common threads of concern among their teaching experience that are notable in striving for socially just educational practices and institutions. Most notably, both participants told of the necessity of having staff and administrative support in their anti-

oppressive teaching. While teachers mostly have agency to make decisions within their individual classrooms, this is often where anti-oppressive education stops. That is to say, with staff and administrative support, anti-oppressive education can go beyond pockets of individual teaching and can transform schools as a whole to be inclusive of the diverse student body that attends there.

The participants explained that ways to help achieve support from staff and administration are through creating networks and teacher education. Both participants noted the difficulty of teaching anti-oppressive education in isolation. This results in feeling alienated in the school, and also resentful towards colleagues with different approaches in education. Alternatively, sharing one's understandings and practices of anti-oppressive education and inviting colleagues and administrators to be a part of the teaching and learning will result in growing a network of support for both educators and students. Additionally, both participants explained the significance of having teacher education. This can be achieved through school systems offering ongoing professional development in anti-racist and anti-oppressive education.

### **Social Significance and Future Implications**

The social significance of this research is to ensure that all students experience value and dignity in educational systems. Student populations are and have always been diverse in terms of gender expression, sexual diversity, race, cultural languages and origins, class, and abilities, colonial history and teaching continue to marginalize students. Teachers repeat socialized hegemonic practices that are patriarchal, Eurocentric, class or status-based, and hetero-normative, which then alienate students by eroding other ways of knowing and result in young people being unemployed, underemployed, unemployable, and vulnerable to the criminal justice



system (Little Bear, 2000; Cajete, 2005; St. Denis, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is the duty of educators to ensure that all students have the opportunity to feel safe, to belong, and to flourish in the education system, and in order to disrupt these cycles, educational practices must address the complexities of social inequalities (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Furthermore, through socially just educational environments, students develop an understanding of what it means to be engaged citizens, and to pursue socially just practices in their daily lives (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The future implications of this research thesis were in its ability to retell the stories of the teachers who work and live as anti-oppressive educators. The purpose is not to reduce the complexity of anti-oppressive education or offer solutions to barriers with best practices, rather the purpose was to acknowledge the complexity and multi-layered experience of the participants, in hopes of offering support to future and current anti-oppressive educators. This research explored the stories of these teachers, lived and told, so that other teachers, like myself, may learn from these experiences. Further research in this topic includes gathering the stories from a broader range of individuals such as additional teachers, administrators, community members, student families, and the students themselves.

### **Reflection on the Research Process**

This research experience for me has been informative and compelling. My initial inquiry immersed from my own frustrations in anti-oppressive education, and my hope for what it could become. Through my previous experience I knew the necessary value it brought to student lives and wanted to gain a deeper understanding of ways teachers were positively influencing the lives of their students. The initial meeting with each participant was comfortable due to our previous

relationships. These relationships deepened throughout our meetings as we discussed our stories. We discussed aspects of our teaching and learning that we were proud of, as well as things we wished we had done differently. A relationship of mutual honesty, vulnerability, and respect was paramount in being able to have these conversations, especially the ones about our own injustices we had experienced. My experience, which I believe to be mutual, was that these conversations not only offered insights moving forward, but also gave way to a cathartic experience while we relived hardships together – both personal and professional. While we have each studied in anti-racism, de-colonizing education, and queer education, our journey to why we valued learning about injustices is varied and unique. Each anti-oppressive course in education has made vast contributions in giving us language and analysis to better value the students in our classrooms. These education experiences were largely gained in graduate studies but would be beneficial for all undergraduate teaching professionals to have this training.

I am grateful to my research participants for sharing their stories, experiences, practices, and knowing with me. From their stories, I have had new reflections, stories, and inquiries of my own emerge. Studying and teaching anti-oppressive education is often an uncomfortable, and difficult self-journey for allies. The initial steps needed are uncovering your own biases and realizing the many ways one may benefit from the oppression of others as dominant group members. A memory of guilt and shame I recall in my learning journey was during a women and gender studies course. The course analyzed the experiences of women in developing countries. This was the first time I was confronted with my white privilege. I felt embarrassed and ashamed of the ways I had previously felt I was going to save women in developing countries. This class was imperative for me in questioning race relations, whiteness, and intersectional feminism. While these realizations of how I benefit in society at the expense of the other is uncomfortable,

educators belonging to dominant groups must work through these tensions so that they are not contributing to the oppression of marginalized students. Effectively, I felt that no matter how uncomfortable the learning was for me, it was minimal in comparison to the suffering caused to students if I did not.

Through this research I have learned from the participants about promising practices and found support in anti-oppressive education that I will continue to take with me on my teaching and learning journey. I am appreciative to my participants for their courage, and vulnerability as they openly shared their stories with me. I am also proud and compelled by the work they, and alike anti-oppressive teachers are committed to, for the positive way it impacts students and society. It is my hope that myself and others may reflect on the participant experiences to continue forming socially just practices.

### **Ending with the Research Wonders**

The aim of this research was to inquire into the lived experiences of two anti-oppressive educators to address two research wonders: how have they come to know anti-oppressive pedagogy? What has supported them in doing so? The stories revealed pertaining to these questions have been impactful, and moving. If one were to consider doing this research again an extension of these wonders might be, in what ways could curriculum better support social justice teaching? What are promising practices in community involvement? While this was a study about the experiences of teachers in anti-oppressive education, I believe a valuable addition would be to collect student narratives of their experiences being a part of anti-oppressive classrooms.

This document includes the unique positioning of teacher participants' stories to live by, and emergent reflections that can be carried forward in future practices of anti-oppressive education. While their storied experiences of coming to know anti-oppressive education, promising practices, and suggestions for the advancement of anti-oppressive education are uniquely varied, we share the common goal of working towards a more socially just educational experience for the lives of students. The title of this thesis derives from a quote stated previously in the research, stating, "...To accept education without betraying it, you must love it for those values that show what it might become. You have to have enough love of learning to have the courage to remake it, imagine it, and teach it (Battiste, 2013, p. 190)." This title pays tribute to Dr. Marie Battiste, and the research participants, for their courage, love of learning, and generosity in sharing their knowing with me.

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APPENDIX A.  
CONSENT LETTER and CONSENT FORM

**You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:  
Up and Against the Norms: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Two Anti-  
Oppressive Teachers**

**Researcher(s):** Shannon Fitzsimmons, graduate student, Educational Foundations, University of Saskatchewan, [saf275@mail.usask.ca](mailto:saf275@mail.usask.ca)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Marie Battiste, Educational Foundations, Room 3082, [marie.battiste@usask.ca](mailto:marie.battiste@usask.ca), 306-966-7576

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- To inquire into the lived experiences of educators who disrupt dominant discourses, in order to find promising practices in anti-oppressive education.

**Procedures:**

- You have been identified from Saskatchewan educators with a minimum of five years of experience in elementary or secondary schools, an educational background in antiracist education and identify as having a socially just pedagogy. There will be two participants chosen based on these criteria.
- You will be invited to participate individually and given the opportunity to read and listen to the research project and its broad purposes and anticipated outcomes. I will share my story of how this research evolved and present the research consent protocols as part of the Human Research Ethics process of the University of Saskatchewan.
- After you have agreed and signed the consent form, a location of the first and subsequent meetings and conversations will be discussed and determined by mutual consent of you and myself. A third party will transcribe the interview recordings and will have signed a confidentiality agreement.
- The research will involve an open-ended dialogue between you and myself pertaining to the research topic. Dialogue with participant and queries to activate conversation about social justice will include: What is your understanding of anti-oppressive pedagogy and its relevance or requirements for public education? In what ways have you come to know social justice education? How significant was social location in your own social justice work? How has your social justice education work with students impacted their relations with each other or with others? How does the rest of the school culture respond to social justice education? Including other students, staff, administration, and parents?
- You will meet individually with me once every three weeks for a one-hour duration (4 sessions x 1 hour each). With your permission, the conversations will be audio recorded and transcriptions created from them. The audio recordings will be protected in a password protected computer and/or recording device and only myself and my supervisor Dr. Marie Battiste will have access to the transcripts but only for this thesis research



purpose. You may ask to have the audio recording device turned off at anytime without giving a reason.

- The transcriptions in hard copy and in electronic copy on a USB stick will be shared with you to review and to edit or modify in whatever way you decide you would like, to decide on themes to discuss further, new and emergent themes, or to add more of their narrative to clarify or to accurately communicate your lived experiences.
- You will then sign the transcript release form after you have had an opportunity to clarify, add or edit your transcript, to show your acceptance of the modified transcripts.

**Funded by:**

- Not funded.

**Potential Risks:**

- This project is low risk, minimized by careful attention to transcriptions and identifying places that may be contentious, and your own ability to modify the transcriptions before being used. You will read through the transcriptions identifying any text you would like removed, edited or modified in the transcripts so as to minimize or eliminate any risks to you in your work or with the staff members of the schools where you work or worked.
- Strategies to be used to minimize or manage the risks for you include the use of pseudonyms for anonymity, if you so choose. You may also keep your own name in the study, and may choose to do that at any time before the thesis is presented as final and published on the University of Saskatchewan library database. Any third party incidentally named by a participant will be changed to ensure privacy and confidentiality, including names of schools, family members, friends, and other identifier localized in places.
- You are encouraged to only participate in dialogue that you are comfortable with.
- If the research reveals information that is required by law to be communicated to a law enforcement or other agency (e.g. child abuse), I am under legal obligation to do so and will inform you of this before the research begins.

**Potential Benefits:**

- The intended benefits of this research are to inquire into promising practices in anti-oppressive education so that more educators may develop instructional or pedagogical tools for creating socially just environments for students and communities.
- The focus of the research then is on your lived life as a teacher and to the conventional systems in which you work to discover how you stimulate, operate within, or manage social justice as a teacher in the schools.

**Compensation:**

- There will be no compensation; however, a small token of appreciation will be given as a gift of reciprocity.

**Confidentiality:**

- For participants who request confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms will be immediately applied to the interview transcripts and to the metadata associated with the audio recordings of the interviews and transcripts (i.e. labelling on documents). Public

reports of the research findings will refer to you by pseudonym and not provide demographic or contextual information that could be used to re-identify you.

- Confidentiality will be maintained as you will have the opportunity to review your transcripts and the report. Participants may choose whether their responses, or a portion of their responses, remain confidential. If you choose for your participation to remain confidential, your name will not be linked to your interview responses at any time. If you choose to waive confidentiality, you will be thanked by name. You will only be linked by name to the responses you choose to have associated with your identity in the final report.
- To protect your confidentiality and/or anonymity, including, the storage of audiotapes, and transcripts, the audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a password protected computer. Identifiers to you, your location, or your situated identity in the transcripts will be identified and removed, or modified per your request. The research project results and associated material will be safeguarded and securely stored by the faculty member/researcher at the University for a minimum of five years post publication. When the data is no longer required, it will then be appropriately destroyed and deleted.
- The data from this research project may be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential at all times, unless you choose otherwise. Although I will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given or may choose a pseudonym, and all identifying information (such as the name of the institution, your position etc.) will be removed from the report.
- After the interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.
- An audiotape recording device will be used. You may request that the recording device be turned off at any time.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some or none of them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:"

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous, and to use the pseudonym, \_\_\_\_\_

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I wish to use a pseudonym until the final review of the thesis, at which point I may choose to be acknowledged by my name \_\_\_\_\_

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

You may quote me and use my name and I understand the risks in doing so:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I would like to be acknowledged for my knowledge (meaning your name will appear in the thesis and other subsequent publications)

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

**Storage of Data:**

- The data will be stored for 5 years minimum in a password protected computer by the thesis supervisor. When the data no longer required, the data will be destroyed. The consent forms will be stored separately from the data in a locked filing cabinet.

**Right to Withdraw:**

- Your participation is voluntary and you can engage in only those discussions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Withdrawal will not affect your academic status, and/or access to, or continuation of, services provided by public agencies such as the University, hospitals, social services, schools, etc. When a participant withdraws, his/her data will be deleted from the research project and destroyed.
- Should you wish to withdraw, you may do so at anytime in the research and all data stored will be destroyed.
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until all data has been pooled and data analysis begins. After December 2018, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

**Follow up:**

- I will provide you a link to the final thesis that can be accessed through a thesis data base, and I will provide you an emailed copy of the thesis.

**Questions or Concerns:**

- Any information about this proposal, the research, or use of the data may be requested by email or hard copy by contacting me Shannon Fitzsimmons saf275@mail.usask.ca or my supervisor Dr. Marie Battiste marie.battiste@usask.ca

- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board on (date inserted). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to this committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

**Consent:**

**Continued or On-going Consent:**

- Consent to meet, converse, and tape to transcribe results will be declared for each of the times we meet, and you will be asked to sign the form at the beginning of each meeting.

**SIGNED CONSENT**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____ <i>Name of Participant</i>	_____ <i>Signature</i>	_____ <i>Date</i>
_____ <i>Researcher's Signature</i>	_____ <i>Date</i>	

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

APPENDIX B.  
TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

**Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural and Biomedical)**

**TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM**

In cases where direct quotations will be reported that may compromise the anonymity of participants, it may be appropriate to afford participants the right to verify the accuracy of their responses and/or of the interpretation given to them. Please see our application guidelines for a discussion of these issues. When a transcript release form is appropriate, it should be signed after the participant has had the opportunity to read and revise his/her transcript in order to acknowledge that it accurately portrays what he/ she said. For instance, you may wish to use wording similar to the following for a Data/Transcript Release Form:

Title:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with [name of the researcher]. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to [name of the researcher] to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher